The Fairbank townsite is in the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area (SPRCA), part of the National Conservation Lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management. Contact the BLM Sierra Vista Office at: (520) 459-6400 or visit their web site at: http://www.blm.gov/az/st/en/prog/blm_special_areas/ncaarea/sprnca.html.

Welcome to Fairbank!

A thumbnail of Fairbank history

Fairbank was occupied from 1881 to 1973. It was founded during the Tombstone silver rush and survived the end of mining to become a railroad, ranching and commercial center. At one time, stage coach lines, Wells-Fargo shipping, a telegraph station, restaurants, saloons and a hotel operated here in support of three railroads. The El Paso Southwestern Railroad (EP&SW) endured floods, an earthquake and the eviction of the town. A 1900 train robbery is famous. Fairbank reached a population of over 200 during the 1910s, fading away as the railroad industry contracted. The SP train service along the San Pedro ends. Train service to Patagonia ends 1962. The Fairbank school closes. The SP depot is closed and is soon torn down. Only a handful of residents remain. The BLM acquires the Little Boquillas Ranch. From this point on, most residents work for a railroad or the Little Boquillas Ranch. This area is designated the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area.

What to do during your visit

• Visit the Fairbank Schoolhouse, which contains a museum, book store and gift shop. The school is open Friday, Saturday and Sunday 9:30 AM to 4:30 PM
• Tour the town using this brochure
• Walk to the San Pedro River
• Walk to the Fairbank town cemetery
• Hike the four mile loop trail north of town
• Explore the Little Boquillas Ranch corrals
• Hike one of the other trails in the SPRCA; see the guide in this booklet or ask at the schoolhouse

Fairbank Historic Timeline (Continued)

1901. George Hearst sells the Boquillas land grant. The New Mexico and Arizona RR (NM&AZ) begins to lay track south of Benson.
1902. The El Paso and Southwestern RR (EP&SW) is formed by Phelps-Dodge, it absorbs the AZ&SE.
1903. The EP&SW builds a spur from Fairbank to Tombstone; erects a new depot south of Fairbank.
1905. 25 residents. Ben Heney is president of the Fairbank Commercial Company (Mercantile).
1906. The U.S. Supreme Court validates Hearst’s purchase of the Boquillas grant, voiding all other claims. Some residents tear down or burn their houses. The Mercantile, hotel, and some other properties are leased from the Little Boquillas Ranch. From this point on, most residents work for a railroad or the Little Boquillas Ranch.
1924. A business directory lists 200 residents. The SP acquires the EP&SW.
1929. Arthur Heney owns the Mercantile and Hotel and is manager of the Little Boquillas Ranch.
1930. U.S. census: 72 residents.
1941. The population is 125 residents. Arthur Heney owns the Mercantile and Hotel.
1944. The Epic Railroad closes.
1945. The SP Depot is closed and is soon torn down. Only a handful of residents remain.
1957. The BP acquires the Little Boquillas Ranch.
1972. The SP train service along the San Pedro ends.
1990. The school is closed.
1990. The BLM acquires the Little Boquillas Ranch.
1996. The BLM acquires the Little Boquillas Ranch from Tenneco Oil in a land exchange.
1998. The area is designated the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area.
2007. The school house is restored and opened as a visitor center.
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Walking Tour

Hiking Guide

Historic Timeline

All buildings, artifacts and other features in the SPRCA are protected under Federal laws, including the National Historic Protection Act (1986) and the Archeological Resource Protection Act (1979). Please respect our heritage by treating the SPRCA within the SPRNCA are protected under Federal laws, All buildings, artifacts and other features in the SPRCA are protected under Federal laws, including the National Historic Protection Act (1986) and the Archeological Resource Protection Act (1979). Please respect our heritage by treating the SPRCA with care.

Fairbank Historic Timeline

1359. Fray Marcos de Niza explores the San Pedro River for Spain and describes the valley here as an “irrigated, evergreen garden.”
1695. Father Eusebio Kino visits Sobaipur villages near present Fairbank.
1698. The Sobaipuri and Apache fight at Ganyanpitaje, just south of modern Fairbank.
1823. The Elbas family of Sonora is granted the San Juan de Bopullayas Nogales land grant.
1854. The Gadsden Purchase is ratified, adding this area to the United States.
1877. Silver (Tombstone) and copper (Bisbee) are discovered. The Grand Central silver mill is built just north of current Fairbank.
1881. George Hearst consolidates his ownership of the Boquillas land grant. The New Mexico and Arizona RR (NM&AZ) begins to lay track south from Benson.
1882. NM&AZ reaches the Babocomari and turns west. A depot is opened at the turn (near Tombstone). Wm. Hall and Harry McKinney survey a townsite and sell lots. In March 1882, there is a store, smithy, saloon and several houses. It has several names: “Kendall,” “Junction City,” “Wye,” and finally Fairbank, named for Nathaniel Fairbank, a Chicago investor. The Mercantile is built.
1884. 74 male residents. A schoolhouse opens.
1885. Joseph Goldwater (great uncle of Barry Goldwater) operates a store in the Mercantile.
1898. The EP&SW builds a spur from Fairbank to Tombstone; erects a new depot south of Fairbank.
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Fairbank, Railroad Avenue, late 1890s

Arizona Historical Society
Schoolhouse. The First Fairbank school was built in 1884. That wooden structure burned down in 1920; it was replaced by the current building. The new school had one room that could be divided by a partition; a side room was added in the 1930s. Up to 45 children attended, grades 1 to 8. One or two teachers worked here. The school was a community center, hosting dances and events. A fence enclosed the schoolyard, including boys’ and girls’ privies. Students from the 30s and 40s returning for annual Fairbank reunions talk about their adventurous childhoods at Fairbank, some rode horses to school. The school was closed in 1944; students then were bused to Tombstone. In 2007, the school was restored to serve as a visitor center and museum; original materials were used wherever possible. Doors and windows were reconstructed to match the originals. The floor is original. The blackboards are from the Lowell School in Bisbee, the desks from Tombstone. The school structure was made of pressed gypsum blocks manufactured by the Arizona Gypsum Block Company in Douglas, Arizona. Buildings made of these blocks, each of which measures 24 x 12 inches, are common around Cochise County in buildings from the early 20th century - a unique local building tradition.

Small House. This building dates to 1885. Originally 16 feet long, it was extended east by another 10 feet. Three sides still show the original board-and-batten construction; the fourth was added to give it the “Mercantile” Hotel. Photographs taken in the late 1930s show a derelict building that was torn down during a highway construction project in the early 1940s. Today, the stone foundation of the building is visible near the Mercantile, under the highway fence.

Montezuma Hotel (site). Built in 1889 to serve railroad passengers, the hotel offered rooms, a restaurant and a saloon. In August, 1894 the hotel was badly damaged during a San Pedro River monsoon flood. Four feet of water, mud and sand inundated the hotel. Following this, the hotel was rebuilt higher up on a stone platform (visible in the picture above). A broad covered porch and row of trees surrounded the building. By 1909, Arthur Heney and his partner Wilcox, the town’s first postmaster, had purchased the hotel and had replaced windows and doors; braces hold the structure together. Plan to use the Mercantile as the visitor center were abandoned when the extent of the structural problems became known.

NM & AZ Depot (site). Following construction of tracks south from Benson in 1881, the New Mexico and Arizona Railroad (NM&AZ) built a depot in 1882 to serve passengers and freight, mostly going to and from Tombstone. Passengers arriving at Fairbank would ride a stagecoach to Tombstone for $1.50. The depot was on the west side of the NM&AZ tracks, across from the Mercantile and hotel. There is no evidence of this building today. A water tower and pump house, still standing, were constructed at the same time, just south of the station (across Highway 82). At one time, the depot housed a Western Union telegraph station and a Wells Fargo office. This was the site of the famous train robbery described below. Later, the depot became the home and office of the Southern Pacific agent living in Fairbank. The structure was accidentally burned down in the late 1980s.

House. The house across the street from the school is referred to as the “teacher’s house.” Former residents of Fairbank tell us that the teachers lived in this house until the school's closure in 1944. After that, it was used as a residence, probably for employees of the Little Boquillas Ranch. The house originally was fronted by a screened-in porch that was enclosed at some point.

Montezuma Hotel, late 1890s
Arizona Historical Society

Jeff Milton
Arizona Historical Society

- his right arm was broken and bleeding profusely. He tore the sleeve of his shirt to tie off the arm to stop the bleeding. While passing out, Milton threw the keys to the safe into a pile of boxes in the car. The robbers searched for the keys and rifled the packages in the car - to no avail. As a crowd of citizens gathered, the outlaws fled. The affair continued, beyond our space to tell. Dunlap was left on the trail by the gang, who expected him to die. He was found by a posse and named Alvord and Stiles, who were not in the holdup party. Now they were on the run. Over the next few months most of the gang were arrested and jailed, although Alvord escaped from jail twice before ending up in the Yuma Territorial Prison. Gravely injured, Milton was taken by train to San Francisco where he eventually recovered, although he lost partial use of his arm. Jefferson Davis Milton already had a distinguished career as a lawyer in 1900; Texas Ranger, El Paso Chief of Police and Wells-Fargo guard, later, he became the first Customs Agent collecting the U.S.-Mexico border, a task he performed for some time. During the 1920s and 30s he and his wife lived in Fairbank and then Tombstone.

The Chinese Community. Chinese immigrants were mining in Arizona as early as 1868. Southern Pacific construction crews in Arizona in 1879 included 1,100 Chinese. Most Chinese were made "sojourner" in the USA temporarily to earn money to send home. Some stayed on in Arizona farming, running restaurants, laundries and other businesses, usually in the face of relentless hostility. Substantial "China Town" existed in Phoenix, Tucson and Globe. "Hop Town" in Tombstone covered 2 blocks. The Can-Can restaurant, owned by Quong Kee, is still standing at the northwest corner of Allen and Fourth Streets. Most Cien Pen Rio Towns had "Chinese Garden" farms. Chinese farmers at Fairbank had irrigated croplands and a small settlement. The Chinese cemetery is located by Milton and other Customs Service agents, a stop on the illegal immigration route that ran from Mexico to Tombstone. Fairbank residents fondly remember fireworks the Chinese residents would detone to celebrate their New Year. Chinese-Americans farmed at Fairbank into the 1950s.

Historical Notes

The Train Robbery of 1900. No other event in Fairbank's colorful history gained the notoriety of the robbery of February 15, 1900. An outlaw gang, secretly led by Wilcox Constable Bert Alvord and his deputy Billy Stiles, had robbed the Wells-Fargo Express car of a Southern Pacific train the prior year in the Sulphur Springs Valley and gotten away clean. Now they sought a repeat by robbing the Express car of the NM&AZ train as it stopped in Fairbank. A gang of 5 thugs, led by "Three Fingered Jack" (Stiles) and the Wells-Fargo Express car guard, Jeff Milton, opened the car's doors to unload packages, the robbers, using the crowd waiting on the train platform as a shield, called out to Milton to leave the car and give them the keys to its safe. Milton refused and gunfire ensued. Milton, at first unable to return fire due to the crowd, was finally able to fire his shotgun, hitting Dunlap and wounding another outlaw. Milton was also hit by four shotgun pellets. In the ensuing melee, Milton fired his own pistol and killed Albert Kulp, a member of the gang. Milton was taken by train to San Francisco where he eventually recovered, although he lost partial use of his arm. Jefferson Davis Milton already had a distinguished career as a lawyer in 1900; Texas Ranger, El Paso Chief of Police and Wells-Fargo guard. Later, he became the first Customs Agent collecting the U.S.-Mexico border, a task he performed for some time. During the 1920s and 30s he and his wife lived in Fairbank and then Tombstone.